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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to dispel a number of misconceptions about the nature of meaning, namely that: (1) synonyms are words that have the same meanings, (2) antonyms are words that have opposite meanings, (3) homonyms are words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings, (4) converses are antonyms rather than synonyms, (5) ambiguity is bad, (6) standard formal English is more logical or more grammatical than are its nonstandard counterparts, and (6) a piece of writing can be evaluated regardless of audience or situation. Synonymy and paraphrase may have the same truth value, but not the same distribution of old and new information, nor the same emotional effect. Antonyms are basically the same but polar opposites on one semantic dimension only. Homonyms are divided into two classes, homographs and homophones. Converses, such as "buy" and "sell" are exactly alike in meaning and are used to describe the same situation, but with a different point of view and with a different treatment of syntactic information. Ambiguity is the basis for metaphor, satire, humor, and advertising. Non-standard English is typically more logical and internally consistent than is standard English. Appropriateness to the situation is a primary factor in the evaluation of any language corpus. (Author/CLK)

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THE MEANING OF MEANING ETC.

by Don L. F. Nilsen

At the outset, I must admit that the title of this paper is not entirely original. In 1923, eleven years before I was born, two scholars, by the names of C. K. Ogden, and I. A. Richards published their famous book entitled, The Meaning of Meaning. This book, valuable as it is, was not intended to give final and irreversable answers to all questions that might be asked about meaning; but rather, it was intended to raise certain issues, and provide certain insights into the nature of meaning. The present paper has exactly the same purpose, except that it has the advantage of being written fifty years later--a significant fifty years, I feel, in terms of the history of scholarship related to semantics.

Of course there are many ways of attempting to resolve the dilemma of the meaning of meaning. My approach will be to investigate what meaning is by examining what it is not--in other words, I would like to examine some common misconceptions or incomplete conceptions of meaning.

Most people believe that synonyms are words which have the same meaning, and paraphrases are sentences which have the same meaning. Some time ago, however, linguists began to attack word-for-word translations on the grounds that cognates, or synonyms, or sentences in two different languages cannot mean exactly the same thing because they occur in different social and linguistic contexts. But what about two synonyms in the same language? I feel that no two words in any

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language have exactly the same meaning. It would not surprise me if you could think of two common words which are so alike in meaning that it would be difficult to articulate the difference. Nevertheless, I feel that these two synonyms would differ from each other in tone, or style, or formality, or attitude, or in some other aspect of what we call connotation. And the process of literary maturation (which we as English teachers are intimately concerned with) is largely a process of making finer and finer distinctions between words which are almost, but not exactly, the same in meaning. Paridoxically, although no single individual has the ability to articulate the difference between all of the synonyms of a language; for any particular pair of synonyms, there are native speakers who can make the distinction in question.

If no two words are exactly the same in meaning, then it follows that no two sentences which contain different words can have the same meaning. The sentence "One of those militant Black Panthers gunned down a police officer," and the sentence "One of our brothers shot a pig," might be used to describe exactly the same situation. But clearly these two sentences do not have the same meaning, though in some sense they are paraphrases of each other. They differ in style, and tone, and formality, and attitude, and other aspects of connotation. In fact, these sentences are the same in only one respect--they refer to the same real-world event. In other words, these two sentences have the same denotation, and this is the necessary and sufficient condition to make them paraphrases.

But now let us go one step further, and consider sentences which are paraphrases of each other mainly due to the fact that they contain

basically the same words, but in a different order. Does a sentence like "I looked over the class" mean the same as "I looked the class over"? Or does "Last summer my boys went to Arizona" mean the same as "My boys went to Arizona last summer"? Or, finally, does "The masked rider showed us a silver bullet" mean the same as "A silver bullet was shown us by the masked rider"? Again, we have to say that such senterce pairs have the same truth value. The sentence "Last summer my boys went to Arizona" is true if and only if the sentence "My boys went to Arizona last summer" is true; but this only means that these two sentences are paraphrases of each other. It does not mean that they have the same meaning. They differ in focus, and in naturalness, and they also differ in what I assume the listener already knows. Therefore, the next time a linguist asks you whether or not a transformation changes meaning, you can respond, yes, it does change the connotation part of meaning, and it changes the focus, but it doesn't change the denotation part of meaning--the truth value.

Another thing that is hazy in most people's minds is the concept of homonymy. If I asked you to define the term "homonym," you would probably say, "It's a word that sounds the same as another word, but is spelled differently, and has a different meaning." Such a definition would fail to take into account the fact that there are two types of homonyms. Homonyms like t-h-e-i-r, t-h-e-y-'-r-e, and t-h-e-r-e, which are spelled differently, are more accurately called homophones. And homonyms like b-a-n-k (of a river), and b-a-n-k (for money), which are spelled the same, are more accurately called homographs. Now, in case

you are not yet adequately confused, let me bring in still another concept, exemplified by bow (for arrows), and bow (of a ship) i.e. words which are spelled the same and have different meanings, but which are different from homonyms, homophones, and homographs, in that these words sound differently. Such pairs as bow-bow are called heteronyms.

Let us now turn to another difficult concept. I'm sure that noone would hesitate to define the term "antonym." I believe the definition might go something like this: "Antonyms are words which have opposite meanings." If this were the case, we would expect "elephant" and "toothpick" to be more likely to be antonyms than would "man" and "woman," for surely an elephant is less like a toothpick than is a man like a woman. So, in fact, we must say that antonyms are basically the same (that is, they are members of the same syntactic and semantic class), and they differ from each other only on the basis of a single semantic feature; in our example of man and woman, this feature is sex. Another thing not always realized is that a word can have more than one antonym, just as it can have more than one synonym. The word "whisper," for example, may have either "shout" or "yell" as its antonym. But this matter is even more complicated. Suppose you are asked to give an antonym for the word "enunciate." Since "enunciate" means to speak clearly and distinctly, you may give either "drawl" or "chatter" as an antonym, since these words both represent indistinct speech. If I asked you to give me the antonym of "slender," you might respond either with "skinny," or "fat," depending on which semantic feature of "slender" you were using as the base, though "skinny" and "fat" are themselves antonyms of each other.

Antonomy can contrast an action with a lack of action, as in accept vs refuse; it can contrast an action with the opposite action, as in button vs unbutton; it can contrast an action with that same action done differently, as in walk vs run; it can contrast polar extremes such as always vs never, or it can contrast polar non-extremes, such as seldom vs usually, but since usually is synonymous with frequently, normally, and occasionally, we should not be surprised that seldom has normally, and occasionally as its antonyms as well as frequently.

Now let us consider such words as buy vs sell, give vs take, and borrow vs lend. Are such words antonyms, as is commonly believed to be the case, or are such words synonyms? There is evidence for both arguments. These pairs are synonymous in that both words of the pair refer to the same real-world event. I can look at a particular activity, and I have choice of describing this same activity with the sentence "John leant some money to Mary," or "Mary borrowed some money from John." So in a sense, the words lend and borrow are synonymous. But, on the other hand, it might be argued that the action of lending, or selling, or giving is opposite in direction from the action of borrowing, or buying, or taking. A way out of this dilemma is to avoid the issue altogether, by providing a new category label for such terms. Such pairs are often called converses.

Another faculty conception that many people have about semantics is that ambiguity is bad, and to be avoided at all cost. This is based on another misconception--that the only real reason that language exists is to relate as directly as possible to the real world. If, at the present time, I were writing for a physics journal, I may be

forced (at least to some extent) to concede that clear, and objective, and unambiguous, and uncreative language is the only legitimate goal, for all matters of significance lie in the real world, and language is a tool for relating to the real world as directly and unambiguously as possible. But we are not physics teachers; we are English teachers. We are concerned not only with how language relates to the tangible, physical world, but also with how it relates to worlds of imagination, of hypothesis, of emotion, of laughter. The real concern of English teachers should not be basic literacy, where a person is merely able to see something in the real world and put this down accurately and unambiguously in writing. We should not be concerned so much with the teaching of reading and writing, as with the teaching of interesting and sophisticated reading and writing. In teaching ambiguity, we should be concerned not only with how to avoid it, but also with how to recognize it, and how to use it effectively, for ambiguity is the basis of symbolism, of metaphor, of satire, and of a great deal of humor.

Another commonly held misconception about meaning is that standard formal English is a more efficient and effective tool of communication than are its nonstandard counterparts. In fact, standard formal English is in many ways inferior to its nonstandard counterparts. Nonstandard dialects tend to regularize patterns, and make them more logical and internally consistent. Standard English has more irregular nouns and verbs than does non-standard English. If we look at the language as a whole. we will see that such non-standard expressions as the reflexives <u>hisself</u> and <u>theirselves</u>; the plurals <u>youall</u>, <u>youuns</u>,

and mongst-ye; the substantives yourn, hisn, hern, ourn, and theirn; the contraction ain't, the contitional in "If I was a teacher I'd make a lot of money;" the relative in "Give the money to whoever points a gun in your face;" the adverb in "Drive slow;" the quantifier in "I have less principles than John," and the incorrect verb form in "I will go to school tomorrow," all make more sense than their standard-English counterparts.

We should learn a lesson from literature. Many of the characters in great literature who use non-standard dialects have the human traits that should be eminated in society. The author is not usually teaching the lesson that a person can be great despite his handicap of speaking a nonstandard dialect. Rather he's saying that this person is an individual, and we should try to identify not only with this person's actions, but also with the language and culture which he represents. We don't say that German, or French, or Arabic is inferior to English just because it is used by people with a different culture and value system from ours. We don't say that Italian is an inferior language just because it deviates from standard Latin, from which it derived. Then why should we say that Black English, or Chicano English, or locker-room English is inferior? I believe that NCTE's official stand on "A Student's right to his own language" is the correct stand.

A final misconception about communication is that a particular piece of writing has an intrinsic value regardless of its appropriateness to the audience or situation. Many English teachers select literature on the basis of their own interests and literary sophistication rather than that of their students. They say to their students, "Here take

this Faulkner, it's good for you." Today's students are demanding relevance. What is relevant to the teacher is not necessarily relevant to the student. Are we as English teachers to say that Killmore's "Trees" is worse literature than is Joyce's "Ulysses" just because it reaches a humbler audience?

A piece of writing is not good or bad by itself. It is good if it is effective in communicating ideas and concepts and attitudes and impressions, and if it is effective in relating to the intended reader, whoever he may be. Communication is a function of appropriateness. We cannot disregard the audience in judging communication, for the effective writer must determine what his reader already knows, what his reader doesn't know but should, and then the writer must present his material in a relevant, internally consistent, and interesting manner.

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When I was an undergraduate student, I took a course in creative writing. One thing I learned in that course is that an author should never hang a rifle on the wall unless he intends for that rifle to be used by the end of the story. You may recall that in the title of this paper I hung two rifles on the wall. To this point, I have been talking about "the meaning of meaning," but only that.

The second rifle I hung on the wall was the "Etc." The allusion is to a famous professor fo semantics who considered his subject area so complex and nebulous that he had to conclude each lecture by writing on the board "Etc." I feel like the semantics professor. I have not finished, but I must stop. Let me stop, therefore, with the word which should be used to conclude all semantic discussions . . . . . Etc.